# “Be the Help” Campaign & Black Disappearance among the Multiracial Left

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**“Be the Help” Campaign & Black Disappearance among the Multiracial Left**

**Tamara K. Nopper**

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One day a friend and I were talking about “Black disappearance” as a phenomenon. She spoke of it in regards to the new film about Joyce Carol Vincent, a Black woman whose dead body was “discovered” decomposing on the couch in her London apartment nearly three years after she went missing. We also discussed the numerous cases of missing Black women and how, despite being one of the most policed and surveillance groups—by the state and the public—Black people can disappear quite easily from public view, with the same state apparatus putting little effort into finding missing or dead Black people.

I want to speak here of another form of Black disappearance, that which operates in multiracial progressive politics. This may seem an odd topic, since African Americans clearly care about and participate in progressive politics, with some becoming famous activists or pundits in the process. But there are particular ways Black disappearance happens in progressive politics, and the “Be the Help”

campaign of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and its supporters, built around the widely debated film *The Help* exemplifies this well.

The NDWA is an organization of domestic workers comprised primarily of immigrant women of color. Following the historic victory of Domestic Workers United (DWU) in getting the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed in its home state of New York, NDWA co-founder and director Ai-Jen Poo (who had worked with DWU and other domestic workers organizations in New York City that morphed into DWU) and her constituency set their sights on getting the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights passed in California and putting a national spotlight on domestic work.

In the process, NDWA initiated the "Be the Help" campaign, which played on the popularity—as well as controversy—of *The Help* as well as Kathryn Stockett's novel upon which it is based to bring attention to the 2.5 million women who currently work as domestics. Marketing the immigrant women of color workers as the "modern day help," the "Be the Help" campaign brought together a motley crew of supporters, including one of the film studios that produced *The Help*, Hollywood actors and actresses (including Oscar nominee and winner Octavia Spencer), and domestic employers. Unusual in that a *labor* campaign collaborated with the *employer*—in this case Hand in Hand: The Domestic Employers Association—the "Be the Help" campaign also relied on supportive writers, publishers, and commentators in progressive media. For example, during Oscar weekend, the "Be the Help" campaign was spotlighted on Melissa Harris-Perry's new show on MSNBC. It was also the subject of an article by Applied Research Center president and executive director and *Colorlines* magazine publisher Rinku Sen, posted on the publications' website and widely circulated on social media. An article championing the campaign, written by Ilyse Hogue, a columnist for the *Nation*, appeared on that publication's website the Monday immediately following the Oscars.

That the film depicted the story of African American women domestic workers in the legalized Jim Crow era in the south and had been roundly critiqued by numerous African Americans, including historians, Civil Rights activists, cultural critics, actors, filmmakers, and many Black people whose concerns might not reach a public stage seemed to go unnoticed by the NDWA and its allies.

*Or did it?* Was it a case of not noticing Black people's concerns about *The Help's* homage to the racist and sexist archetypal Mammy figure—which as one writer points out, is not, in racial politics, to be confused with the domestic worker—or was it a case of Black disappearance?

There is a lot to suggest it was the latter.

**Exhibit A:**

On the path to the Oscars and the "Be the Help" Oscar parties being promoted by NDWA and Hand in Hand, the NDWA was promoting, on its website and social media, African American support of *The Help*, most notably that of Myrlie Evers-Williams, who had penned a defense of the film. Disappeared were the numerous African American critics of the film, including some who were also participants in the Civil Right Movement (CRM) and/or family members of domestic workers. Evers-Williams, as an icon of the CRM, was used to trump widespread Black critique—or at least unease about the movie—and her defense of *The Help* could be used to transform NDWA's campaign into a moral one as non-African American Blacks, in this case immigrants of color—eventually got the support of some famous "righteous" African Americans. This support, though, can be considered a strategic move to disappear African American critique of *The Help* and the racial history it projects—and by extension, manage questions about the "Be the Help" campaign.

**Exhibit B:**

On the episode of Melissa Harris-Perry's show discussing *The Help* and NDWA's campaign that aired the weekend of the Oscars, Barbara Young was the domestic worker and NDWA organizer

featured as a panelist. In response to concerns about the racial politics of the film and how it impacted African Americans and racial political memory in the U.S. raised by a white woman academic and a Black male cultural critic, Young made it a point to say that she was a domestic worker. That Young is a Black immigrant raises questions about why she, as one of two Black women in a staff of ten, was the one selected by NDWA to represent the "Be the Help" campaign on a show hosted by an African American professor who had been openly critical of the film's portrayal of Black women as mammies. Despite many pictures of the "Be the Help" campaign depicting non-Black Latinas and the visibility of Ai-Jen Poo—an Asian American—in other campaign-related promotion, it is Young, a Black immigrant, who gets to silence the critics about the film's portrayal of African American women. On the show, Young basically "disappears" Black political critique by posing herself as the "ultimate expert" by saying she is a domestic worker and a member of the "modern day help," while never addressing the treatment of African American Black women. This gesture makes the two other panelists critical of the movie for how it depicts racial history and white/African American relations appear as "elitist"—one of today's common rhetorical moves against Black political critique from a political cross-section of civil libertarians, the Tea Party, anti-affirmative action advocates, and liberal and progressive immigrant rights advocates. Interestingly, this act of Black "disappearance"—a domestic worker questioning the authenticity of political concerns from critics of *The Help* by asserting one's work experience—disappears when progressives writers, who undoubtedly are *not* working as domestic workers, praise NDWA's campaign.

**Exhibit C:**

On February 24, two days before the Oscars, a story written by Rinku Sen, publisher of *Colorlines*, runs on the magazine's website promoting the "Be the Help" campaign. Sen, a South Asian American, pens a defense of NDWA's campaign that stands out for two reasons. One, Colorlines website had previously posted a story about a statement against the film issued by the Association of Black Women Historians as well as other criticisms of the film for whitewashing American history. The other reason Sen's article stands out is the tinge of anxiety embedded in the article. Indeed, this anxiety is evident as Sen seeks to explain why the film can be useful for social justice advocates despite Black criticism. For example, after acknowledging how the film has been criticized by African Americans, Sen writes:

> *Whatever the film's shortcomings, anyone with an ounce of strategic sense would have taken full advantage of this opening in the popular culture, and NDWA is not short on strategic sense.*
>
> *But their intervention did more than take advantage of a cultural moment—it shaped that moment to mitigate against the potential negative effects on a national audience. From an organizer's perspective, there is a danger embedded in stories of triumph over segregationists, especially a story as prettily presented as this one. Viewers develop little appreciation for the grit of struggle, imagine that the era was less horrifying than it really was, and thus imagine that ending such practices was both more easily achieved and more permanently effective than the struggle's reality. NDWA's intervention around "The Help" created a chance that viewers would walk away inspired to take action on the unfinished justice agenda of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than crowing about how much things have changed for the better.*

In this act of Black "disappearance," African Americans are acknowledged as heroines of the CRM as is their "unfinished" struggle, which NDWA, an immigrant rights group is now "building upon" and will carry out (i.e., "win"), presumably not just out of political expediency (or even anti-Black hostility) but as a "tribute" to the past. That political memory over the past is still hotly contested—indeed, this is partly what is fueling the debate over *The Help*—is not the issue here as we are to understand that

immigrants (and non-African Americans) are the ones who are politically dealing with the present and will lead us into the future. This form of Black "disappearance" is common among the multiracial progressive left and involves absorbing African Americans into a political agenda steeped in immigrant rights, white liberalism, and "beyond Black and white" ethos. In this case, African Americans are "disappeared" by being absorbed into the common liberal and progressive narrative of "first, African Americans fought for x, y, and z, then immigrants of color 'came along' (despite being here since at least the 1800s) and are the 'new' Blacks, and now immigrants are building on the 'legacy' of African Americans." "Disappeared" in this narrative is that African Americans still physically exist, still experience racism, and still politically raise opposition and mobilize. Yet in such narratives, African Americans only actively exist in the past; today, they only figure as analogy, allies, or sentimental inspiration.

**Exhibit D:**

Sen's article, as well as the campaign slogan "Meet the modern day help" include another example of Black "disappearance," this time from the economy and the industry of domestic work specifically. If immigrant women of color are the "modern day help," what happened to the numerous African American women who worked as domestic workers and labor organized in the domestic work industry —a point NDWA acknowledges—before large numbers of immigrants (some of them Black immigrants) became the overwhelming base of NDWA?

According to some commentary, including that written by sociologists studying Black immigrant domestic workers, African American women moved out in large numbers from domestic work because they became "professionally empowered" and refused to go back to "menial jobs." This explanation is a play on the common discourse that Black people are no longer represented in certain industries (domestic work, janitorial, restaurant work, agricultural labor) to the same extent they once were because they "refuse" to work certain jobs (as opposed to being displaced). I question the accuracy of such claims of African American women's professional and economic empowerment given their relatively low wealth and earnings as well as their high unemployment rate. More, there is evidence that domestic employers, and employers in other industries, prefer Black immigrants to African Americans (although they tend to prefer non-Black immigrants to Black immigrants). For example, in her book *Raising Brooklyn*, sociologist Tamara Mose Brown recounts a few examples of African American women and Caribbean women domestic workers arguing at a park in which the former point out that they have a difficult time being hired or are more likely to be hired for part-time domestic care as opposed to the full-time work Black immigrants get. Although Brown does not investigate this issue further—indeed, it would challenge the narrative of African American women's "empowered" movement out of domestic work in New York City that she gives in her book—these observations raise questions about how NDWA's constituency has the demographics it does as well as what happened to African American women in domestic work? We can also think of how privatization, with its disproportionate impact on African Americans via the privatization of jobs they had made some inroads in—in some cases without needing a college degree —as well as the criminalization and disproportionate felony convictions of African Americans is also going to require more African American women to find jobs in other spheres of work, and more likely in private homes, etc., *if they can get that work*.

In other words, there is still most likely economic competition happening between African American women and immigrant women than what is depicted in the "Be the Help" campaign. Yet proponents of this campaign, including Sen, "disappear" African American women from the economy and labor activism by depicting immigrant women as picking up the mantle from African American women. While African American women and their labor and economic woes have not disappeared, they have, from the domestic work industry as well as in explanations of contemporary immigrant labor niches. Again, they and their labor struggles as domestic workers, only exist in the past. As Sen, quoting Poo, opines: "Domestic workers will certainly need all those openings and more to move their most ambitious agenda—nothing less than ending the oppression of domestic workers, and thereby putting to rest a

small portion of a legacy from the days of slavery. As Poo said, 'It's this generation's job to reverse that.'"

**Exhibit E:**

The Monday immediately following the Oscars, the *Nation* publishes on its website "In Defense of 'The Help'" by Ilyse Hogue, a white woman columnist for the publication. Like Sen's *Colorlines* article, Hogue also addresses African Americans' critique of the movie while promoting the "Be the Help" campaign. After describing the campaign and her weekend spent with thirty domestic workers listening to their stories, Hogue writes:

> *Prominent thinkers and writers have blasted the movie for its failure to adhere accurately to the comprehensive experience of domestic workers in the civil rights era. The Nation contributor and MSNBC host Melissa Harris Perry called the movie a Disney-fication of the civil rights struggle. And there is undeniably irony in the fact that the movie's African-American stars were nominated for Oscars for playing roles so similar to Hattie McDaniel's Mammy in Gone with the Wind, for which she won 1939's Best Supporting Actress Oscar. All of these points are critical and worthy of consideration and debate. The more things change, the more they stay the same as my grandfather used to say.*

Hogue's grandfather's wise words, which explain absolutely nothing, are followed with this sentence: "Getting a critical mass of domestic workers together is still no small feat." Unlike Sen's article, Hogue's defense of NDWA seems less preoccupied with the (anxious) championing of the African American women of the CRM era and is thus more blatant in its disregard for Black criticism of the film. Yet like Sen's *Colorlines* article, Hogue's column "disappears" Black critique of *The Help* by emphasizing the plight of contemporary domestic workers and NDWA's political savvy in using the film in their campaign. What we can take from this is the following lesson: if non-Blacks can find a strategic way to build upon the labor that African Americans have done—whether as paid (or unpaid) workers or as activists and protestors—then certain questions about displacement and misuse are off of the table and are effectively "disappeared."

**Exhibit F:**

NDWA's campaign built strategic alliances with Hollywood to promote the plight of its domestic workers. In February, Poo, along with *The Help* director Tate Taylor and now Oscar winner Octavia Spencer, participated in a panel at the University of Southern California, where they discussed the film's significance. On the panel, titled "The Power of Film to Create Social Change," Poo basically made the same statement she did in Sen's article. As Poo states in the *Colorlines* piece: "'Social change happens through changed hearts and minds, changed behavior and changed policy…All that is connected. Doing this work around the film allowed us to tap into the way in which pop culture has a broad impact on the imagination.'"

In addition, the NDWA campaign has benefited from a campaign by Participant Media, one of the producers of *The Help*. The cause is described by the company accordingly:

> *In The Help, a group of women risk everything to tell their stories. Through the process of storytelling they become empowered and, in turn, inspire and empower others. In the spirit of these bold characters, The Help Social Action Campaign offered individuals the opportunity, both on and offline, to share their own stories of*

> *perseverance.*

Sen, in her *Colorlines* article, champions Participant Media's campaign:

> *In October, Participant Media, which produced "The Help," supplemented its own storytelling campaign with a series of short videos featuring domestic workers, with links to the policy campaigns. Those videos have been viewed some 100,000 times. Participant has a long history of producing films about social issues ("Food Inc," "Chicago 10," "An Inconvenient Truth") and creating educational and action campaigns.*

In Sen's account, Participant Media is simply continuing its work towards social change and not promoting the *The Help* or strategically silencing African American criticism of the movie as a marketing tool. In this case, Black critique of *The Help* is "disappeared" through a media campaign that plays on sentimentality and the very real desires for human dignity to market its product for mass consumption at the expense of African American questions about the film's storyline or how it "affirms" racist stereotypes of African American women to a larger non-Black public. NDWA's engagement with this campaign, as well as Sen's praise of it, gives Participant Media's marketing of its film, as a product, a moral free pass, as now the company can claim it opens the door for contemporary domestic workers to share their stories.

It is also telling that Spencer, as well as some movie and television stars (such as Black actor Harold Perrineau, who hosted a party for Hollywood children with domestic workers)—vetted by whom Sen describes as "NDWA's entertainment industry consultants Fuel Change" –can openly support the NDWA's campaign without jeopardizing Spencer's Oscar win or *The Help's* other nominees. While best actress nominee Viola Davis engaged in what some might call damage control via interviews and push back against Black critique of *The Help* on the path to the Oscars, Spencer and others can openly support NDWA's "Be the Help" campaign. In this way, Black political critique, as well as Black actors and actresses demanding better roles, "disappear" in the new storyline about *The Help* crafted by an alliance of movie studios, political consultants and strategists, Hollywood directors and actors and actresses, award nominees, and immigrant rights organizations.

That such a campaign could appeal to, or at least not turn off enough Oscar voters, who are, according to a *Los Angeles Times* study, 94% Caucasian and 77% male in an industry marked by dismal career prospects for Black actors, actresses, filmmakers, and writers, is telling of the marketing power of this act of Black "disappearance." Sadly, this marketing power appears to not only appeal to white Hollywood but to the multiracial progressive left political consumer as well.

In sum, Black disappearance, then, is more than the numerous missing Black people never recovered but definitely missed by relatives, friends, and lovers. Black disappearance is also the unexplained absence or departure of Black people from various spaces, be it cities, jobs, and progressive politics. It also involves the attempt to absorb an emphasis on the specificity of the Black experience and African American political opposition to anti-Black racism into multiracial projects and revisionist campaigns. While ample criticism of this crafted absorption has been raised by progressives—most notably how reactionaries strategically misuse Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s rhetoric to promote white supremacist policies—examining the National Domestic Workers Alliance's "Be the Help" Campaign reveals how Black disappearance, as a political strategy, is also at work among the multiracial progressive left.

Tags: Be the Help, Blacks in Hollwood, Colorlines, domestic work, immigrant rights, immigrants,

mammies, mammy, National Domestic Workers Alliance, NDWA, The Help